



Le Corbusier. Architect of Books

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LE CORBUSIER. ARCHITECT OF BOOKS

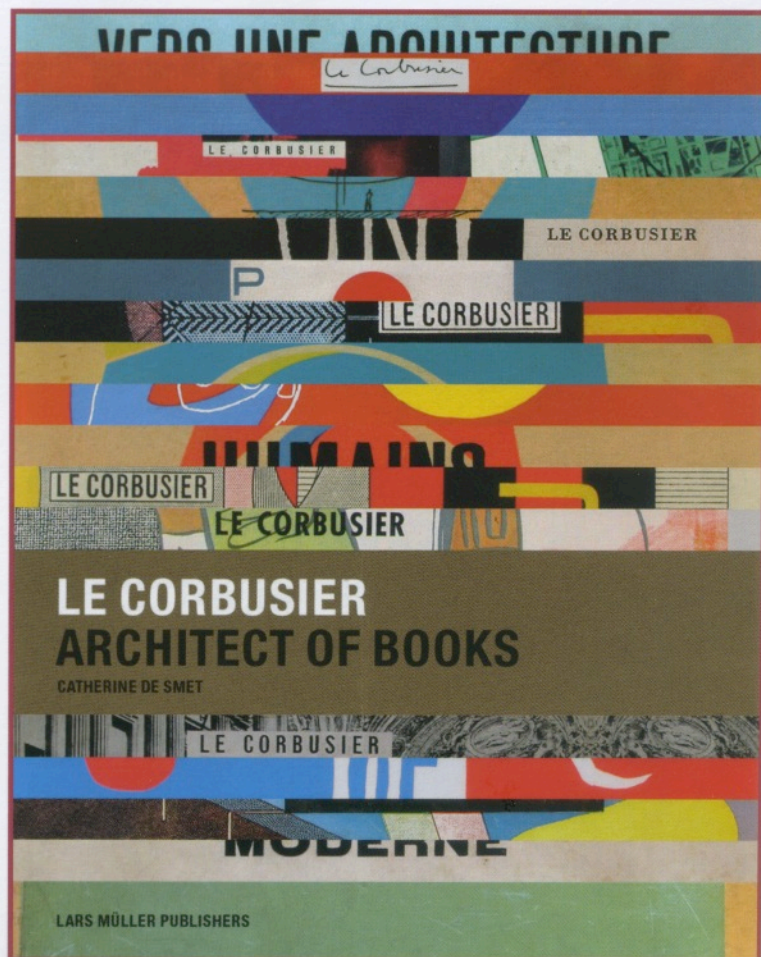
Catherine de Smet

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Some people adore their pets; there are those who would even go as far as to try and immortalize them with gravestones and memorials; but few would have their favourite book covered in the hide of their dear departed canine companion.

Such was the curious and intense relationship Le Corbusier had with books, that 'Pinceau' - who appears in many paintings, drawings, and photographs by his famous master - is literally the cover of a treasured 1847 copy of 'Don Quixote'. Catherine de Smet - author of 'Le Corbusier Architect of Books' - refers to this in disciplined understatement: "...as providing evidence of a certain eccentricity..." but like most things this much maligned and misunderstood architect did, it was a deeply symbolic act. Well aware that animals play a significant role in symbolism and as a reaction to the French bourgeois practice of taking favoured books to the binder to have them expensively bound, this was his way of lifting a leg to tradition while at the same time reveal the important role books would play in his own mythology.

From the age of 25 when he wrote his first book 'Étude sur le mouvement



"Architect of Books' reveals his working processes: the graphic and typographic techniques; the numerable 'mock ups' that were all hand drawn and pasted with images and text from weekly magazines, newspapers and sales catalogues; and his use of collage to reshape and frame photographs, paintings, drawings and diagrams."

d'art décoratif en Allemagne', till 1965 when he died at Cap Martin, Le Corbusier's phenomenal output of buildings, urban plans, paintings, tapestries, and sculpture was supplemented by an equally intense and constant, publishing process. Thirty-five books are personally credited to him, as well as a large number of associated writings and editions. This considerable bibliographic legacy is documented for the first time in this new book, and it also forms the basis for a travelling exhibition. De Smet's research - in the archive of the Foundation Le Corbusier in Paris-

provides an opportunity to appreciate anew the attention Le Corbusier devoted to his labours in publishing. Had he just written 'Vers une architecture' in 1923 - skilfully reassembled and repackaged from his earlier writings in 'L'Esprit Nouveau' - it would have been enough to guarantee his fame. But after the initial and tentative publications on German Art and Cubism, 'Vers une architecture' was to open a veritable flood of ideas in book form that would continue throughout his career. Even during the Second World War and amidst his own troubled political associations with Vichy, he ►



► published a large number of books that would determine new directions when he returned to the '35 rue de Sèvres'.

No architect has ever come close to his remarkable output of books. Right up to the last days before his death in 1965 at the age of 77, he had just agreed the terms to publish another twenty-eight. If he could not get a publisher to support his ideas - as was the case with 'La Ville Radieuse' - he would publish himself.

'Le Corbusier Architect of Books' has its text framed between two carefully selected images of Le Corbusier: first the young Jeanneret in the 30's, furiously at work and surrounded by a wall of books in his Rue Jacob apartment; then 'Corbu' the old master looking out at us through his thick black spectacles in his rooftop sanctum, holding out the large open pages of 'La Poème de l'angle droit' like wings. From his early monk like cell, to the 'saintly' elevation to his own symbolic universe, this book takes us on a 'pilgrimage' where the books are laid out like a trail in his wake.

Publishing like architecture is an essentially collaborative process and Le Corbusier worked with a number of different publishing houses. Oscillating between a devious charm and dogged, ruthless, determination, he was unstoppable at achieving his intentions. Those publishers unable to satisfy his high expectations were barraged with complaints, ridiculed or abandoned. Much to the chagrin of his literary agent, he was prone to intervene at any stage of publishing, printing and distribution. Ever keen to seek out

new and more empathetic collaborators that could innovate, it was finally with Jean Petit - a young graphic artist and publisher - that his books would reach the level of a unique art form.

'Architect of Books' reveals his working processes: the graphic and typographic techniques; the numerable 'mock ups' that were all hand drawn and pasted with images and text from weekly magazines, newspapers and sales catalogues; and his use of collage to reshape and frame photographs, paintings, drawings and diagrams.

What is clear is his ability to invent a new kind of typographic space. Using shapes of bold colour, interlocking figures and free form cuttings, there is an architectonic depth on the page that comes from an innate sense of composition. Rich with associative connections, the pages are similar to the concept of the 'promenade architecturale' where a sequential rhythm is influenced by the newly evolving world of cinema. These techniques are now well used by many current architects.

'Une Petite Maison', 'Poésie sur Alger' and 'Ronchamp' are small graphically charged and compact books that can be slipped into the pocket like one of Le Corbusier's favoured A6 sketchbooks. ►



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text is lucid, informative and without the jargon that haunts much of the current over-anxious research work. De Smet has skilfully let Le Corbusier's 'Publishing Edifice' emerge from within what is a huge oeuvre. Her work modestly acts to facilitate and enable the books to be discovered afresh. It will be a revelation for those who know nothing of this part of the architect's work, while encouraging those who do, to look and think again. But if you are still thinking of 'Pinceau' gracing the cover of 'Don Quixote', then be reassured, this book comes in a colourful, well bound and 'animal free' hardback. ●

Paul Clarke

Le Corbusier. Architect of Books
Catherine De Smet

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► 'Le Modular' and 'Modular 2' are dense and highly illustrated numerical studies while by contrast 'Aircraft' is a powerful photo essay. If 'Vers une architecture' was direct and almost political in its war cry of the machine aesthetic then 'La Poème de l'angle droit' needs the deciphering skills of Champollion to uncover the multiple layers of a very personal symbolic world.

Le Corbusier's maxim "...what you cannot build you draw, and what you cannot draw, you write..." ensured that much of his publications were condensed manifestoes of his unbuilt ideas. His writing style (like his personality) was a potent mixture of humility, humour, paranoia and exhilarating arrogance. Personal anecdotal asides would often vie with long quotes from Rabelais. 'Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches' is typically an amusing and under valued text that best reveals in his writing the dualities of his complex personality.

'Architect of Books' is a carefully researched book that is beautifully illustrated and photographed. The

